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ABSTRACT

Using Guilford County (North Carolina) School District's implementation of North Carolina ABCs legislation as a backdrop, this paper discusses the unintended consequences that school-improvement plans create for administration. The ABCs legislation ties a large-scale testing program to a requirement that each school develop a community-supported plan to improve student test scores. Although it is too early to determine whether this objective is being accomplished, the plans and their development process are having major side-effects on schools, their communities, and individuals in Guilford County. Data from semistructured interviews with a wide range of participants indicate that the state and local testing program dominated discussion on the focus of school-improvement plans. An administrative advisory group has exposed individuals to new, personally disturbing information about instructional ineffectiveness, while fostering personal understandings about themselves and the educational process. Small teams have reorganized committee systems and spurred reevaluation of staff relationships. Faculty have increased awareness of diverse educational needs. Individuals expressed concerns about unsystematic evaluation in schools, plans' public nature, parents' role, and planning efficacy. Schools have reacted differently to legislative demands. Guilford County's experience suggests that principals are linchpins in establishing change. (MLH)

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UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES OF SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT PLANS

PAPER PRESENTED AT AERA, SAN DIEGO, APRIL 1998

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EVALUATION APPROACHES AND MODELS THAT ARE USEFUL IN ASSESSING EDUCATIONAL REFORM

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Unintended Consequences of School Improvement Plans

The Guilford County School's Office of Assessment and Evaluation hired me in September of 1996. I received a fast and furious introduction to the system of education in Guilford County, North Carolina and the USA. My predecessor had the (mis?)fortune of overseeing the implementation of the State's previous school accountability tool, the Performance Based Accountability Program, or PBAP. I was told soon after my entry to the position that it was one of the reasons she left.

I started soon after North Carolina legislator passed the latest in the State's efforts at school accountability - the Excellent Schools, or ABCs, legislation. This, coupled with my newness to the US educational system and Guilford County, has created a unique situation for me. I had knowledge of educational reform movements within the context of education and the economy, mostly from an Australian and sociological perspective, and I was only vaguely aware of US approaches. I was unaware of the history of North Carolina reform movements in any detail. I had no real idea of the accountability program in North Carolina, but I knew they tested children. More importantly for me, I was not very clear on school improvement plans, a part of North Carolina's push for improved educational outcomes. I was, however, well aware of goal setting theories and practice as it applied to individuals and to some extent organizations. It seemed to me to be a small jump to school improvement plans. I also came to my position with a background in social psychology with an emphasis on the interactions between individuals and their environment.

I have now spent 19 months in Guilford County and have experienced one cycle of the State's accountability program, and two cycles of the preparation, presentation and implementation of school improvement plans. When I examined how I had responded to the process of school improvement and reform in North Carolina, I found myself puzzled and intrigued by both large and small changes I noticed in my workplace and in my personal ideas about education and educational reform. Naturally, being a curious person, I was intrigued as to whether others had witnessed changes, both in their work and/or educational environment and personal thinking as a result of engaging in the school improvement planning process.

Rather than examining whether schools and students were improving "academically," the stated purpose of these school improvement plans, I was interested in what was not mentioned in State literature about the ABCs and school improvement plans. This led me to think about unintended consequences of school improvement plans.

The main objective of this paper is to provide an overview and discussion on the unintended consequences that school improvement plans create for administration, schools and parents. A study of a North Carolina school system provides a setting and context for the discussion.

What is a School Improvement Plan?

Before beginning the discussion of North Carolina I would like to present a brief summary of the idea behind school improvement plans. School improvement plans seemingly arise out of the 1980's effective schools research, though their history can be traced back to earlier attempts to implement organizational changes (McInerney & Leach, 1992). The underlying assumption of a school improvement plan is simple: organizations that set goals and define how those goals will be met are more likely to meet their goals.

In brief, a school improvement plan is a written document that is supposed to chart the strengths and weakness of a school, the goals for improvement, the strategies required to overcome those weakness and develop strengths, and how the strategies will be evaluated. These plans are developed by a team, as diverse as there are schools (at the least), but generally consisting of faculty and parent representatives. This team identifies the mission of a school, analyzes strength and weaknesses, sets goals and priorities and develops strategies to reach these goals. Depending on the model employed it may also have some form of budgeting and personnel authority. Theoretically these plans are "living documents," reflecting continual appraisal of a school's needs.

Background on North Carolina's Use of School Improvement Plans

Over the last two decades, "western" school systems have engaged in numerous efforts to reform teaching and learning, generally pedagogical and organizational in nature. Efforts towards improvement in student and school achievement have been based on the assumption that factors such as: high expectations for all children; decentralized decision-making; goal setting; active participation by parents, educators and communities; and meaningful and ongoing teacher education and professional development, are essential.

In the US, reform efforts and public discussion has been dominated by standardized test results provided by programs such as the National Assessment of Educational Progress (e.g., Corbett & Wilson, 1993; Dorn, 1998). Recent developments in the US have seen an evolving school accountability model that attempts to blend high stakes, large-scale performance assessment with the notion of site-based decision-making. One such program is North Carolina's ABCs legislation.

The ABCs legislation ties a large-scale testing program to the requirement that schools provide the wider community a plan of how the school is going to improve the performance of students on state mandated tests. Elementary schools (grades K through 5) and Middle schools (grades 6 though 8) are required to define how they will improve student performance on the state designed and mandated End-of-Grade Reading and Mathematics tests given to Grade 3 through 8 students, and the Grade 4 and 7 Writing Tests. For the 1997-98 school year, high schools (grades 9 through 12) are required to define how they will improve student performance in: Algebra I; Biology; Economics, Legal and Political Systems in Action; US History; English Composition (English I); writing (English II); and the college prep and college/tech prep completion rates.[1]

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[1] The assessment of schools is a two-tiered model consisting of a growth and performance standard. Schools are first rated on the "growth" they achieve in the areas assessed. If they fail this criterion they are then assessed on the performance standard of more than 50 percent of their tested students "at and above grade level." Schools that meet "Expected" or "Exemplary" growth targets receive an incentive bonus. Schools that do not meet growth targets, but do meet the performance standard, are labeled "No Recognition." Schools that fail to meet the specified growth and performance targets are defined as Low Performing and may be taken over by the state.

To meet this mandate schools are required to establish School Improvement Teams that consist of faculty representative and parent representatives that reflect the socioeconomic and racial background of the student body. These improvement teams are charged with preparing a school improvement plan for presentation to the local board of education, which can only accept or reject the plans. At a minimum, all school plans must address the state mandate of improvement in all areas tested and reported by the state. The plans must also include details of the use of state funds for staff development, waivers from state rules and regulations, and be publicly available documents.

The program is still evolving. High schools, while exempt in 1996-97 from the assessment part of the legislation, were required to write plans that focused on "subjects required for graduation," a vague and difficult concept to pin down where graduation in one school district may not entirely reflect the local graduation requirements in another. In 1997-98, high schools have a more defined program of tests and other indicators they are being assessed on, with more indicators to follow in the next few years (e.g., dropout rates and additional tests).

Other legislation is already affecting the focus of the improvement plans. The School Safety provisions attached to a recent bill demands that in the 1998-99 academic year local boards hold schools, and in particular principals, to locally determined school safety standards. For the majority of schools the safety plan will be structured into the existing school improvement plan.

The school improvement plan is not new to North Carolina. Previous accountability legislation has existed with some form of improvement plan process attached. The previous program, the Performance Based Accountability Program (PBAP), required schools to develop their own plans with embedded accountability assessment criteria. The current ABCs version separates these roles. The State defines the accountability criteria schools will be assessed on, while schools aim to develop a plan of instructional programs and strategies that improve student performance on these criteria.

Why This Paper?

Within North Carolina the public focus is on the testing program and the resulting outcome of publicly rating schools. Little public attention is paid to the school improvement plans, despite the legislative focus on the plans as the means to improve school performance on these tests.

The process of developing and implementing improvement plans has consequences for central administration, school faculty, students, and parents, that go beyond changes in classroom and school practices designed to meet the legislative demand to improve student test performance. The focus on test scores serves to demean the role, process and potential of school improvement plans. These plans can have substantial impact on formal and informal groups within a school community, and on individuals.

The North Carolina ABCs legislation reflects reform programs around the world that rely on the concept of schools and school systems developing plans to improve. These plans impact a wide variety of practices beyond classroom teaching. The plans and the process by which they are developed provide information about the state of public education and the relationships between administration, faculty, and parents. By examining the process and the nature of school improvement plans, greater understanding of educational systems can be obtained.

Methods and Data

Initially I titled this paper "unintended consequences" when I presented the idea to AERA. Now after more thought and reading I have realized that such a term can not be used for any policy, and particularly for government legislation. It is sometimes very unclear what is intended and unintended by the different players in the policy development system. As of late, I have come to use the term side effects as representing organizational and individual consequences that are not directly mentioned in the policy.

I have found that the analysis of policy side effects is one of the lesser-known areas of theory and research, particularly in education policy evaluation. Michael Scriven, while being one of the rare attenders to side effects, seems to have only broad answers. Scriven (1993) proposes sending into the field new staff members who have not been briefed on a program to observe and ask questions of program recipients. While commenting on how we can assess the value of these side effects, through the use of needs assessment and "standards of value, such as legal, ethical, and environmental standards" (p. 24), Scriven seems quiet on how evaluators with no new staff members can look at side effects.

Other evaluators, such as the US General Accounting Office (GAO), mention side effects, but define them as concerns of particular stakeholders, in the GAO's case "congressional concerns" (GAO, 1995, p. 20). My reading of the existing "side effects" literature suggested that the consensus that does exist requires that individuals and organizations should engage in reflective observation and the maintenance of open communication channels.

When I looked to other areas of policy analysis I found a confusion of models and ideas. The preponderance of cost-benefit analysis in the "policy impact research" literature suggests economic imperialism at work. Other impact analysis models emphasize only the most obvious stakeholders and require the analyst to know whom they are working for. The GAO has a fascinating booklet entitled "Prospective Evaluation Models" which it uses as a framework to look at the *potential* impacts on different stakeholders, but identifying the stakeholders is not broached.

Sherman Dorn's (1998) recent article, which explored practice and political legacies of statistics and school accountability systems, provided some clues for my own thinking. Dorn (1998) defined practice legacies as "the influence of policy on short-term behavior" and political legacies as "the way the use of statistics by itself shapes public debate" (p. 3).

Dorn's (1998) discussion on practice effects, coupled with examinations of the effect of high stakes standardized testing on classroom and local education practice (e.g., Corbett & Wilson, 1993), provide examples of both individual and organizational

behaviors affected by policy. These arguments refreshed memories of my own interest in the links between individuals and their environments that go beyond a person-environment dichotomy. It sparked an old and familiar memory (who says bias is dead?).

Being inclined to look at the world through a social-psychology perspective I was drawn to explore the interactions and effects of this school accountability and improvement program using Albert Bandura's (1977, 1986) model of Triadic-Reciprocity as a conceptual map. It was an intriguing notion, using a model that attempts to explain the relationship between personal, environmental and behavioral characteristics and relating this to examining the side effects of policy.

In brief, Bandura's (1977, 1986) model details three sets of influences on individual behavior: Personal, Behavioral and Environmental. Personal influences refer to cognitive and other personal factors that influence human behavior. This can include personal characteristics (e.g., ethnicity & gender) and cognitive factors (e.g., decision-making styles & intellectual ability). Environmental influences represent aspects outside of the individual's control, such as economic conditions. Finally, behavioral influences represent prior and current behaviors of the individual (e.g., previous decisions). Two important concepts are attached to this model. First, the three concepts interact in a dynamic and interdependent nature. Second, the relative influences exerted by the three sets of factors vary for different activities, individuals and circumstances, and do not necessarily occur simultaneously and with the same strength.

While the framework was not perfect it did help me acknowledge that the side effects of policy are on organizations and individuals, and that these side effects are interactive. I envisaged the relationship as such:

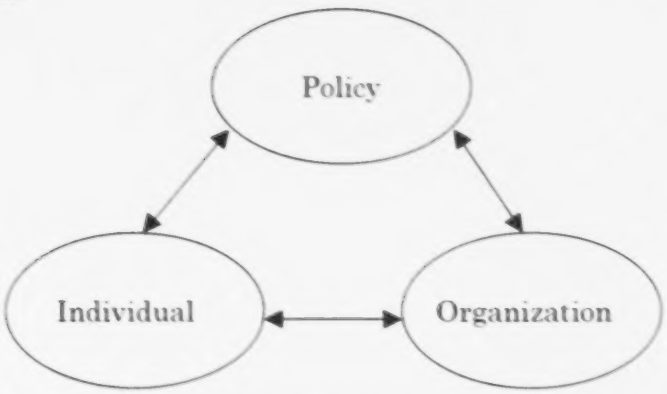

Figure 1: A map of the conceptual relationship between Policy, Organizations and Individuals as developed from Bandura (1977, 1986).

The model outlined above provided me with a framework for looking at how individuals in Guilford County, including myself, were impacted by the school improvement plans. I was interested in how individuals saw the policy affecting educational organizations, such as the school system, individual schools, community groups, and other formal and informal groups, and how they personally were being effected in their behaviors and thinking about schools, school reform and education in general.

Using the framework described above, I asked individuals from a range of backgrounds and experiences in the educational community to describe and comment upon the personal and organizational side effects of the school improvement plans. Data on these side effects was collected through semi-structured interviews with individuals involved in the community, school and administrative system.

Some Ideas

The first two years of the implementation of the school improvement plan legislation provided an indication that there were significant consequences for individuals engaged in the planning process, as well as the operation of the local education system. Such interviews with different individuals within the education community can lead to an overwhelming level of information about the side effects of

the planning process. As such, I will restrict my paper to discussing some of the major ideas presented by interviewees.

Individuals, not surprisingly, were concerned with how the schools and the central administrative system had reacted to the school improvement planning process. Little mention was made of how other organizations that are less directly involved in the educational system reacted to school improvement planning, even when interviewees were directly prompted. Still less direct reference was made to personal changes in response to the process, and it was difficult to engage people in conversations about changes in their thinking.

Allow

Before proceeding to discuss more specific instances of the side effects of the improvement plan program, I will highlight a word that arose on a number of occasions. During individual interviews, and in public forums with the school board, the concept of "allow" was used by school based faculty.

The term was used in two ways. One use suggested that educators felt that the improvement plan provided a tool that they could use to rationalize personal (e.g., teacher practices) or organizational changes in school-based operations. Individuals used the term in a manner that indicated that before this ABCs plan, personal and organizational educational procedures did not "allow" things such as cross-grade meetings, a critique of business as usual, or focus on the Standard Course of Study. The plan was used, consciously and unconsciously, as an impetus to attack existing practices.

The second use of the term was in reference to focusing the staff away from the state-testing program. The plan provided impetus for the faculty and the community to sit down and discuss a wide range of other areas that were not reflected in the accountability program.

This term will occur in a number of examples provided in the rest of this paper. I theorize that it represents one mechanism by which individuals and organizations rationalize change and discussions, the removal of the responsibility for initiating change and placing it as a reaction to an outside event.

Focusing

It should be of little surprise, and perhaps some relief to professional legislators, that professional educators, whether teaching or administrating, were able to state that the school improvement plan helped focus schools. Teachers, principals, administrators, and the occasional parent interviewed for this paper all noted that the necessity for the plans "focused" their school. Individuals used terms that suggested that discussions were occurring about what the school was doing and where it should be going. Terms used concentrated on becoming focused, refocusing, prioritizing activities, moving in one direction, and helping ask questions about what schools are doing. One principal stated that the plan:

> *Makes a school focus on what are their goals. Prior to this, schools had focus and goals but I'm not sure that everyone knew what they were.*

A teacher suggested that the plan:

> *Makes a school look at itself and what it is doing to help students.*

Other statements about the planning process indicated that the plans could lead to a more unified staff and the establishment of concrete goals. This "allowed" schools to focus and act as a team, to:

> *Refocus and move in one direction.*

The indications are that the professional educators interviewed for this paper believed they conducted or participated in needs analysis and goal setting behaviors that reflected the intent of the state mandate.

All was not smooth sailing with regards to the development of a school focus and the formation of school goals. From one principal's viewpoint there were:

Still rebels who aim to not know.

Exactly what the schools and individuals were focusing on was also a little unclear. Individuals had different pictures as to what the focus of a school was. Upon questioning, individual educators talked about focusing on the "basics," essentially addressing the state mandated testing program. Other educators saw a focus on student performance to include science and social studies, two locally tested subjects. A principal noted a broader focus on the curriculum stating that the:

ABCs forced us to focus on the Standard Course of Study.

Statements made in interviews directly indicated that some faculty did discuss other aspects of the school's mission, though these were not always addressed in the final school improvement plan. One high school principal stated that the school improvement plan gave his school the:

Opportunity to sit as a total staff and think about what the total school will do and not just the areas being tested.

Another principal noted that the plan served as a reality check and allowed her to question her own desires, and those of her faculty, to implement new strategies and programs.

Other focus statements indicated some faculty members interviewed were engaged in a "how, what, and who was responsible" analysis of resource use. This re-assessment of resources was brought about by the realization that school improvement costs money and resources and has to be examined in the light of state and local mandates.

The emphasis on the term "focus" suggests that the program is meeting its fundamental legislative aim, at least with regards to providing a school community the mechanism to discuss focus and consequent resource use. Schools are using the process as a means to assess current and future programs in light of state and local

mandates. The program has also highlighted confusion and conflict about what to focus on.

The Domination of the Accountability Program

In general, the state and local testing program dominated discussion on the focus of the school improvement plans. As this marries with the intent of the State's accountability-school improvement legislation, this should be no surprise. One teacher stated that the current version of the planning process, with its close connection to the accountability program, led to a:

> *More serious kind of involvement with school improvement plans since the ABCs, unlike PBAP and others, the aspect of testing has added emphasis to the role of school improvement plans.*

It was hard to remain focused on the improvement plan rather than the testing program. The conversations indicated a difficulty for many people in separating the plans from the state accountability program. This is not hard to understand, as they are so closely linked both legislatively and historically.

There were differences in individual beliefs on whether the school improvement plan focused attention on the state-testing program. The majority view raised concerns that perhaps there was too much focus on the tests in some schools. Parents, school staff and the occasional central administrator suggested the potential for a limited focus on the subjects tested in the state accountability program to the exclusion of all other aspects of the state curriculum. There was also widespread concern about the unconscious and conscious stress on the staff because of the labels assigned to schools based on their test performance.

Another, smaller, group did not link the plans and the accountability program. This group emphasized that school improvement plans "allowed" school faculty the opportunity to take some of the emphasis off tested subject areas. As noted earlier, a high school principal publicly stated that their school improvement plan gave his school the:

> *Opportunity to sit as a total staff and think about what the total school will do and not just the areas being tested.*

Other individuals suggested a more positive interpretation of the link between the plan and the accountability program. The principal at one school that had been labeled Low Performing in 1996-97, publicly stated at a local board meeting that:

> *Low performing schools can use the plan to provide some hope for the children of their school. "Yes we are not doing well but here is the road map to getting somewhere better."*

Individuals also expressed feelings of pressure for themselves and their compatriots as a result of the improvement plans and the testing program. On occasion principals noted that they felt under more scrutiny, and one principal suggested that they were stressed through the requirement to have and set expectations for their staff and school.

There is a struggle between maintaining the focus on the areas tested by the local and state accountability program and the "need" to put in components that are not tested. The confusion is not helped by the State's earlier mandates with regards to the Standard Course of Study, a curriculum that is much broader than that suggested through the State's accountability program. It was clear from the nature of the majority of interviews that discussion about school improvement plans is closely tied to feelings about the accountability program. It suggests that individuals and organizations can become so fixated on the accountability program, which is essentially out of their control, that they ignore the more controllable aspects of the program, what they plan to do in their schools.

A Side-Effect for Central Administration

An initial outcome of the ABCs legislation was the development of a local ABCs Advisory Group, of which I was named convener. The group consists of principals, teachers, parents and central office staff. The advisory group was initiated as a mechanism for discussions about the ABCs and their effects on the local school community. The group was designed with no administrative or policy powers such as

would be found attached to committees. This acts as both a barrier and a benefit, but the group has provided a forum for the beginning of some difficult discussions within the local education community.

Eventually the advisory group found itself developing a program to review school improvement plans before presentation to the local board of education. The ABCs Advisory Group reviewed current versions of the plans for clarity, focus and language. School improvement plans are publicly presented to the local board on a yearly basis and should represent the particular school community's current thinking on how it will meet state mandates.

In this process of reviewing and presenting the plans, the ABCs Advisory Group draws on the expertise and insight of different individuals that go beyond central administrative staff. The group's role in reviewing plans and as a forum for discussion can cause tension and difficult conversations that are both enlivening and disheartening for individuals involved. Issues discussed by the group have included presenting information to the community about the status of individual schools; the skills of principals, teachers, administrators and parents; the link between curriculum and instruction; the jargon involved in educational documents; and the relationship between education professionals and parents and the community.

The ABCs group has exposed individuals to some new understandings that were personally disturbing. Some have expressed frustration with evidence that:

> *We have schools that don't have effective instructional strategies.*

Other individuals expressed thoughts about the process of parent integration, the role of evaluation, the nature of the curriculum, and the role of testing. Other individuals engaged in the group noted that they were developing a broad picture of curriculum and instructional programs. There are also personally important changes occurring to members. One member stated that:

> *I have a rising awareness of personal strengths and weaknesses in organizing and managing the flow of information.*

Through my role in the ABCs Advisory Group I have witnessed communication barriers between different elements of the local education system. Conversely, by placing people in proximity to each other the ABCs Advisory Group has fostered the development of personal understandings about education and one's self, and group conversations about the educational process.

The advisory group has been a positive experience in helping the local education community understand the ABCs and broader issues in education. It has been a difficult path to follow for all involved, but, as with any group where individuals can discuss issues, it has the potential to act as a significant contributor to the debate about the process of education.

Small Teams - Reorganizing Committee Systems

School communities have responded differently with regards to the demands for the school improvement team. Some have used existing committee structures, which may or may not be appropriate for the demands being placed on them. Positive and negative reasons for using existing structures have included, limiting teacher workloads, trying to integrate roles, a limited core of faculty and parent "participators," or plain laziness. Other schools have subverted the process, doing the minimum that is required. They are essentially regarding the planning process as an extra administrative burden rather than a chance to question the functioning of their school community. In some schools organizational changes are occurring as a result of the plans and prior experiences with the planning process.

One principal, who had experience with previous improvement processes, initiated a system of plan development based on small teams. Her previous experience in other schools had suggested to her that only a few persons engaged in the development of improvement plans. She concluded that, not surprisingly, people avoided committee work. The principal functioned under a second assumption that a system of teams working on a plan makes everyone part of the team.

As a consequence of this personal thinking, she developed an approach to the planning process whereby each of five teams were required to develop specific areas of the plan, for example, writing, reading or safety. The principal designed each team to place a teacher in charge so that they "have ownership." Minutes were taken by each team and presented to all the staff so that the entire school faculty and improvement team knew the discussions engaged in.

These teams were elaborately developed. The principal let faculty volunteer for a team but tried to balance them (i.e., race, grade, and role). She assigned people who expressed no preferences. The aim was to spread strengths and weaknesses.

At the end of the small team process the teams were required to present their parts to the school improvement team and later to the full faculty. The entire staff reviewed the team efforts and provided changes. The small teams meant that members could see what was done for instruction in other areas, particularly those areas not tested. Her one difficulty was the integration of parents who were only involved in the rough drafting of the plan, though the principal hoped this would improve in the following year.

This brief example highlights the ways the different ways that individuals and schools are responding to the State's mandate. The responses to the mandate reflect their personal experiences and knowledge, and their awareness of organizations.

Interfaculty Relationships

Related to the development of organizational practices within schools, school improvement teams have also helped initiate many interfaculty conversations. The very nature of the teams, representing a wide range of individuals, reinforces the group nature of the process and the links between staff members. Individuals noted that the teams and their impact on the wider school faculty provided some schools with the impetus for staff to work harder together.

School faculty and administration noted that the planning process "allowed" the sharing of ideas, especially across grade levels, and has helped develop a relationship between principals and staff. A high school principal noted that:

School improvement plans can develop a seamless relationship between principal, staff and the community.

The changes in conversations initiated by the planning process often revolved around curriculum and instruction, but also included personnel matters. A high school faculty member noted that the:

School improvement plans made it easy for departments to focus on curriculum and instruction.

One side-effect that the existence of the plan created was to support the questioning of the instructional practices of teaching staff. The plan provided an external reason for hard conversations about the focus of educational practices within the classroom. A high school staff member noted that it was easier for departmental chairs to talk to teachers in a non-threatening manner about curriculum and instruction, and to quiz faculty as to whether the teacher was "really doing this?"

The plan also provided an impetus for the development of a school-wide responsibility for student achievement. Individuals noted that the accountability program, dominated by the "basics," has the potential to restrict responsibility for school performance. Individuals can respond differently to the accountability program depending on their closeness to testing. The plan, as noted earlier, provides school communities the reason to act as a team. More specifically, the process can lead to a feeling that one school faculty member described as:

Everyone becomes a stakeholder.

This process of trying to involve all staff with the planning can tie into the development of individual staff. A belief raised in a number of interviews was that the interactions with one another, examination of instructional strategies, and discussions about the integration of different aspects of the curriculum, offer individual teachers with an excellent mechanism for staff development.

In summary, the plans can function as an impetus to the re-evaluation of staff relationships, particularly in developing communications between individuals and thereby improving staff skills.

Strategic Planning

School planning still relies on educational professionals. As one administrator stated:

> *Planning doesn't grab anyone by the heart or bowels.*

It had become apparent to a number of individuals interviewed, however, that education professionals, as a group, don't know what strategic planning is. Groups involved in planning do not have the background or training to undertake strategic planning. There were also concerns about faculty skills such as their ability to write clear goals and strategies.

Questions about strategic planning skills were not limited to the local community. One interviewee suggested that the State Administration did not know the theory behind strategic planning stating that the:

> *Charge from NCDPI [North Carolina Department of Public Instruction] in terms of specific plan requirements is out of alignment with the idea of strategic planning.*

The interviewee argued that strategic planning necessitated that schools define their own goals, strategies, evaluation tools, and accountability program rather than have one placed on them.

An important outcome for some individuals involved in the ABCs Advisory Group were conversations about the support mechanisms in place to help school communities with strategic planning. As one member stated:

> *Nobody is equipped to support players who don't know how to get there. There is no systematic support system for strategic planning.*

Other questions raised by the planning process have been about the necessity for central administration departments to present strategic plans, and the extent to which existing groups designed to help schools are supporting strategic planning.

Through their personal experiences in the planning process, or the review process and advisory group, individuals have conversed about the role of strategic planning and the necessity to offer support in the process. It has become apparent to a number of central administration individuals that there hasn't been any training in strategic planning and that the system relies on limited state documentation. This has led to development of future staff support that will offer strategic planning skills.

Evaluation

There were two types of evaluation referred to by individuals interviewed. One was about the evaluations linked to the instructional strategies presented in the school improvement plans. The second involved the evaluation of the planning process itself.

There were concerns expressed by individual interviewees about the nature and scope of the evaluation practices presented in the school improvement plans. This appeared to be of different concern to different individuals in the educational system. One individual stated that she:

> *Hasn't heard a single person say that they have concerns about the variability of the evaluation of strategies.*

It was rare that individual school level administrators were addressing the evaluation of the strategies and the plan in a systematic manner. There were some examples. One high school principal had taken the small team approach similar to that described previously in this paper and devised a process in which each team was also responsible for monitoring their specific area of the plan (e.g., climate, academics, safety). Two to three members of each small team were responsible for monitoring their area and reporting to the School Improvement Team and presenting a regular evaluation report to the principal. An elementary principal stated that as a result of their planning process his school had developed their own system of monitoring that targeted poorly performing children.

There was also some discussion about the integration of data into school planning, the plans providing a framework to think about the data supplied to the school system. There are also discussions and a developing emphasis on the use of formative tools, such as the teacher use of the state item bank to develop nine-week test-lets aligned to the curriculum taught in class.

The role of information and evaluation appears to be ignored by many, or at least paid only lip service within the plans. This issue is something that different individuals are struggling with. Where discussion of evaluation does occur the majority of individuals are focused on the summative evaluation of the State's accountability program. Most of the discussion about evaluation is restricted to individual student assessment.

There is some movement within the central administration to address the evaluation of programs and strategies in a more consistent manner which may lead to more help for the schools to evaluate the programs and strategies they are operating.

The second type of evaluation struggles with the issue of evaluating the process of plan development and the implementation of the plans in the schools. This discussion is currently raising more questions than it answers.

There was major confusion as to whether anyone is required to monitor a school's evaluation or development of their plan. There was also concern that the written document presented as the school improvement plan does not truly reflect the processes used to arrive at the public document or the reality of the school's programs. One central administrator stated that it had become:

> *Apparent that I can't tell from the written plan what is actually going on in the school. There is a divergence between what is written and what I see going on in the schools.*

Among a number of people interviewed there were realizations that the plan development process was an important if little understood function. It was seen as a way to develop school community relationships, individual staff skills, and a wider public understanding of the school. A school principal stated that she was:

> *Clearer that the plan itself is not important, the process of developing the plan is more important.*

She noted, however, that the state Department of Public Instruction and the local board reviewed papers and not the process. As one interviewee stated:

> *How can you evaluate the impact of a process when you only have written document?*

As part of the normal procedures of the educational system, processes do exist for evaluation of the school-based plan development process. There were, however, misunderstandings and confusion about these communication systems as they were not specifically designed for the implementation of the ABCs legislation. This confusion over monitoring the development process has led to difficult conversations between the Parent and Teacher Association and the central administration about the "subversion" of parental roles by some school faculty.

The local education community is struggling with the concept of evaluating both instructional strategies and the development and implementation of the plans. Monitoring the development process dominates many ABCs Advisory Group discussions about the plans. Discussions are painful but worthwhile.

The Public Nature of the Plans and the Role of Parents

Under the state legislation the plans prepared by a school are required to be presented to the local board and accessible to any member of the public. As a consequence, the plans have two levels of public visibility, through the integration of parents into the school improvement teams, and the requirement for public presentation and availability. This has resulted in a number of effects.

An idea presented by a number of individuals was the ability for the public nature of the plans to help other schools think about their strategies. One principal noted that the plan provided the opportunity to see what other schools were doing and to therefore reassess their own instructional strategies. This was particularly the case for those principals, teachers and parents involved in the ABCs Advisory Group who

had an exposure to a wide variety of plans not currently available to the rest of the system.

There was also a general feeling that the community and parents can, and individuals have, become more aware of what is being done in the schools. Being forced to, as one faculty member described it "show us what you're doing," was regarded as a positive step.

School staff interviewed sometimes suggested that the plan and its public nature have encouraged community and parent participation, particularly volunteering that actually helps children. Parents interviewed for this paper have stated that they felt that their suggestions were more valued. Prior to this program, parent and faculty groups were described as "their own entity." One principal noted that the involvement of parents provided more perspectives. Another principal stated that the:

> *Plans can develop a seamless relationship between the principal, staff and community.*

As a consequence of the parental representation on the ABCs Advisory Group, parent representatives have developed a broader view of public schools. Sometimes this is not always a flattering view. One major outcome was the successful lobbying by parental representatives for legislators to change how parents are brought into the school improvement teams.

Conversations were also occurring in some schools that included the student body. One high school principal stated that he was:

> *Looking for other ways for conversations with students who don't normally participate in school system.*

There are barriers to the participation of the wider community in schools, and individuals were aware of the difficulties involved. Having parents on the improvement team is different for parents and staff and requires a lot of work. There were concerns about the "subverting" of the relationship and demands by faculty and parents for defined roles and responsibilities. In contrast, other statements indicate

that the planning process, with its requirement for parents, works to give parents a more clearly defined role.

An idea expressed in some conversations suggested the potential for any change in the relationship between parents and some schools is limited. Faculty expressed ideas that indicated external motivation for school-parent links. As one principal stated:

> *We had to do it, so [the] link between parents and the community was pushed in the school.*

Such an externally motivated model raises concerns about the long-term efficacy the plans in developing links between a school and its wider community.

There were also more specific concerns about the understanding required in the community. As one faculty member stated:

> *None one knows what instructional strategies are especially parents. The average person can tell you what school safety means but not instructional strategies.*

To address such concerns the central administration has developed an "Achievement Night" in which it provides a forum for schools to present their student achievement data and school improvement plan to a wider audience. Individual schools have also worked to develop parent evenings to talk about the school improvement plan. The emphasis by much of the educational community is still on achievement data with the plans a poor cousin, but it is a start.

The plans are generally seen as highlighting parent involvement in many aspects of the educational system and are regarded by some as bringing in another level of parent involvement. This offers immediate challenges and the rewards are unclear to some faculty. There is a great deal of confusion among constituent groups (i.e., parents, teachers, principals, and students) about the role of the plan and the improvement team, but the process is forcing some people to, as an administrator stated:

> *Definitely think more about the role of constituent groups.*

Individuals expressed ideas that they were developing clearer pictures of how the school improvement plan process works in the schools and community, and how groups work, or don't, together.

Efficacy

There was some confusion as to whether the ABCs plans will have lasting impact on the way schools operate in North Carolina. We have already noted the difficulties schools face in strategic planning and queries about focus. The issue of the accountability program driving this system would suggest that if this element were removed schools would revert to previous models.

The history of school improvement plans in North Carolina is not new. A number of experienced teaching and administrative staff interviewed for this paper noted that when improvement plans under the Performance Based Accountability Program (PBAP) were developed, there was a lot of resentment among teachers, generally feelings about attacks on the professionalism of educators. This would lead one to be concerned about a program that is so linked to a feared accountability system that it could collapse once this incentive to participate is withdrawn.

As stated earlier there has been a generally positive reaction to the planning process as having helped schools focus. Not all individuals interviewed for this paper had positive views about the efficacy of the planning process. Occasionally individuals expressed ideas that the plan and the planning process had no direct bearing on what happens in a school. The school improvement plan was regarded by some as having limited effect on school, classroom and administrative behaviors. One central administrator note that there was:

> *No way of knowing whether school improvement plans have any substance in reality.*

This was countered by a personal belief that the plan itself was not going to make any changes, but that the process could very well make changes in how schools functioned.

State policy about testing and the improvement plans was also viewed as restricting what schools will really do. The state testing program does not test science or social studies. Elementary and middle schools plans are required to focus on reading, writing and mathematics, with vague reference made to other areas as determined by a needs analysis. No specific mention is made of science or social studies. It has been of major concern to some individuals that a large number of schools did not address science or social studies in their plans. The local education system tests schools in these areas which does serve to both placate those concerned about the narrowing of the curriculum, and help schools and teachers understand that these are important areas. It does suggest, however, that the planning and testing program can, as one administrator stated:

> *Potentially have taken some schools off course. Not every school can see the connections or curriculum integration.*

Another concern raised about the effectiveness of the program has to do with the demands being placed on staff. Many parents, teachers and principals noted the increased demand on faculty to engage in non-instructional activities and paperwork. Teachers stated they felt pushed and afraid and some have become resistant to the changes that were occurring. An elementary principal noted that teacher retirement rates had increased and that staff were leaving during the school year rather than waiting till the end of the year to retire. This retirement pattern served to fragment faculty and disrupt inter-faculty communication. The principal felt that this was directly attributable to both the school improvement planning process with its increased workload, and general fears about the testing program.

There was an expression of hope that if the planning process was done reasonably well then the plan will have a "good impact" on the functioning of the School Improvement Team, parents, faculty and students. There was concern among some central administrators that the plans will, however, help the rich get richer. It was suggested by a number of separate individuals that, as one person stated:

> *Schools where the process is helping are logically the schools that are already improving.*

It is a concern of mine that little direct mention was made of the effects of the program on classroom teaching. Indications were that staff have been quizzed as to whether the classroom program of study met the goals as detailed in the plan, but discussion as to whether there was any actual change in classroom behaviors quickly moved to the stress being felt by teachers. The biggest impact on classroom practice appeared not to be the improvement plan but the state accountability program. Indeed, as reported earlier, there was some belief that the improvement plan program would have little effect on actual classroom practices. It was a relief to hear from one source that the plan forced them to assess students throughout the year, rather than waiting for the summative assessment program operated by the state.

Another barrier to the efficacy of the plan was that it required a resource discussion that schools were unwilling or unable to have. The allocation of resources to strategies and goals required under state mandate had potential conflicts with other major programs that schools were implementing, either through their own processes or the result of local mandates.

Experiences and beliefs by individuals within the educational system suggest that this legislative program will go the way of many others, essentially "dead" within two to three years. As such, some individuals are unwilling or actively antagonistic towards a program they barely understand and have no faith in. A question I encountered on many occasions was:

What is it going to be next year?

There are lots of rumors about the ABCs program. This coupled with a seemingly general cynicism and feeling of disenfranchisement from the policy process, could seriously impede any potential for positive change this program has. There was antagonism towards the complete program evident in many interviews. As one principal stated in a public forum:

We've been asked to change the tires while the car is running.

The link to the testing program, lack of understanding and feelings I have described as "disenfranchisement from the policy process" have created a climate of suspicion and mistrust about school improvement plans. I would suggest that there is disengagement from education by some of the individuals interviewed, and perhaps by some of the schools.

Conclusions

Reacting to both a perceived public concern about the state of public education in North Carolina, and a general historical trend, legislation now exists that requires each school in North Carolina to develop a plan to improve student test scores. Currently it is not possible to establish the extent of the implementation of these plans, nor whether the plans are meeting their objectives of improving student test performance. The plans, and the process by which they are developed, are having major side-effects on schools, their communities and individuals in Guilford County.

School communities responded differently to this legislative demand. Some schools have reacted by emphasizing whole school and community involvement in the educational process. Other schools have seemingly felt overwhelmed by the process and retreated to doing what was required, a process that probably has little impact on the instructional or organizational practices in the school. The experiences in Guilford County suggest, however, that the principal is the linchpin in establishing change, something the State has not supported in its effort to improve schools.

There are a number of broad issues that the planning process has highlighted for individuals and the systems they relate to. While all of the plans eventually met the minimum requirements of the legislation, some required extensive one-on-one work between central office staff and school faculty. Other plans needed little work. Difficulties with concepts fundamental to the notion of school improvement plans, such as strategic planning, goal setting and needs analysis, have suggested education needs for faculty. The program has also raised other issues, such as public presentation of information, and the state of communication between individuals, schools and the community.

The plans have served to focus though what the focus is seems unclear. The concept of what "curriculum" really means for school communities, while addressed in state legislative acts and the current accountability program, is surrounded by confusion and conflict with existing personal, community-based, school-based and local authority ideas about education.

The planning process has had direct consequences for school faculty. Faculties have reported greater awareness of the diversity of educational needs and programs within schools. As a result of the planning process there are continuing discussions about the future roles of the plans and how to extract information to help all schools and parents understand their school system.

The link between the state testing program and the school improvement plan offers an extra challenge to the educational community. If this testing program follows the way of the Dodo, the external motivation for positive change that the planning process offers will disappear. This may result in a return to business as usual or the rich getting richer. The office in charge of administering the program is responding to the process by attempting to focus schools and the community on the school improvement plans as a positive and "controllable" step toward improving student achievement.

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